

WITHOUT (SCHOLAR-)CURATORS

In a number of museum institutions, particularly in Quebec, France, Switzerland and Northern Europe, the ethnographic or disciplinary approach ensured by scholar-curators has been progressively abandoned as exhibition-making and other curatorial tasks have been taken over by professional project managers and administrators (Shelton 2011:76; Turgeon and Dubuc 2002:22). This departure from traditional curatorship, which grew out of a desire to narrow the gap between museums and society, has slowly turned community engagement and citizen participation into a central institutional objective. This change in museum priorities has significantly impacted the nature of museum management. *Museums Without Curators* addresses this phenomenon, looking at some of the major changes to exhibition making that are occurring alongside changes to the role of the curator in museums, particularly since the advent of New Museology.

New Museology emerged in the 1960s when a group of museum and heritage professionals began challenging the social and political roles of museums, namely those museums operating with an “old museology” (Vergo 1989). Traditional museum work since the 19th century had centred on the “scholar-curator,” a specialist in a given field and keeper of a particular set of museum artefacts (Boylan 2011:418-419; see also Cannon-Brookes 1994:49). The museum was a place of advanced research on human and natural history, its exhibitions were meant to educate, and its collected artefacts were traces of society through which it was thought knowledge of the past was best acquired. It was geared toward the production of specialized disciplinary exhibitions whose narratives were drawn from object-based scholarly research and were conceived through the ‘voice’ of the scholar-curator. Museum work was an extension of academia and its related research and fieldwork practices, and promotion schemes from assistant curator to tenured curator were based on research outcomes and publications. In this context, the museum was a place for generating specialized knowledge with visitors expecting exhibitions to be opportunities for encyclopædic learning.

The theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of New Museology took shape during a roundtable organized in 1972 by UNESCO. The details of these meetings and their subsequent impact on social museology have since received considerable attention (e.g., Assunção dos Santos and Primo 2010; Macdonald 2011; Vergo 1989). In essence, new museologists denounced museums as being too colonial, elitist and centred on collections and collecting methods, their exhibitions and research being too symbolic, too focused on the past, and, overall, too expensive considering that they had no real purpose for contemporary society. New Museology advocated for socially-embedded institutions, with their contents based on people and their actions (human agency), rather than on the symbolic potential of their material traces. Likewise, they sought to democratize culture and forge greater links between museums and societies. Such developments have led to major organizational and operational changes

that have since promoted the ideal of cultural democratization and greater public outreach; the impacts of such principles have been far-reaching and have significantly changed how museums operate. This issue of THEMA is an opportunity to critically examine differences in practical applications of New Museology, namely by taking a closer look at the shifting role and place of curators in different organizational and operational museum structures.

Museums Without Curators builds in part on the Musées de la civilisation's (MCQ) own approach to curatorship and exhibition-making, itself a product of New Museology, which has separated exhibition-making from collection conservation and documentation. The model puts, on the one side of the organizational structure, project managers who are in charge of exhibition production and content, and, on the other, curators (not scholar-curators) who are in charge of documenting, classifying, and augmenting collections as well as recommending objects to project managers to illustrate exhibition narratives. MCQ exhibition project managers were described by MCQ's first director, Roland Arpin, as "specialists of museological communication [...] who ensure the preparation of an orientation document establishing needs in preliminary research. [...] This is followed by the development of the project's hypothesis, spatial and temporal framework, potential use of objects from other museum collections, and evaluation of the "museability" of the (general exhibition) theme" (Arpin 1992:140, *our translation*; see also Bergeron 2002:63). The model privileges the handling and interpretation by project managers of specialized knowledge (specialized research) generated outside the museum, namely in the university sector. Researchers are hired on a contract basis to produce research reports on specific topics and/or act as advisors in scientific committees (formed by the museum). They have little influence on the exhibition concept, *decoupage*, and scenario, these generally being the responsibility of the project manager and the product of collaboration with museum colleagues. The application of this model at the MCQ, as well as in many other museums for now nearly three decades, and perhaps most commonly seen in French-speaking Europe, can confirm but also provide further context and solutions to its possible drawbacks, some of which are discussed here. Drawing from endeavours in community-driven museum projects in various parts of the world, contributors of this issue of THEMA each describe and discuss initiatives that have sought to depart from the traditional scholar-curator model.

Noémie Drouguet examines this shift from curator to exhibition project manager, namely through her discussion of what is now increasingly referred to in Europe as the work of the museographer (*muséographe*), particularly in the *musée de société*. A type of museum that emerged in the 1990s in reference to inclusive heritage institutions, the *musée de société* integrates practices and policies drawn from ecomuseums, site museums, as well as history and ethnography museums; it focuses on exhibition-making and civic participation. Moreover, it aims to depart from traditional, fixed binaries such East/West, local/foreign, art/artefact, proposing instead to "extend ethnography to everyone, including oneself [...] [and apply] the idea that a solution to the problem of the West and the rest is integration: everyone's art in the art museum and all peoples in the museums of society and culture" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006:364). Drouguet's article, an extension of her recent book, *Le Musée de société. De l'exposition de folklore aux enjeux contemporains* (2015), addresses important shifts in the role of the curator in the *musée de société*, whose displaced (or fading) role in exhibition making creates certain professional "malaises" in attempts to find optimal solutions to reconcile curators with exhibition project managers and designers.

In their paper, Areti Adamopoulou and Esther Solomon unpack another aspect of museums' breaking with the disciplinary boundaries, namely institutions increasingly entrusting curatorship to artists who revisit and reinterpret museum collections, giving them new meaning. Their study of the "artist-as-curator" highlights the work of contemporary artist, Mark Dion, whose reinterpretation of contemporary *Wunderkammern* breaks away from the set disciplinary boundaries established since the Enlightenment.

Jonathan Paquette and Christopher Gunter report on their research into Southeast Asian museums and efforts made by some institutions in Vietnam and Cambodia to demystify curatorial work, placing curators as both subjects and makers of the exhibitions. These efforts made to “exhibit” curators challenge the set narratives of curatorial work, moving away from the expert-to-novice approach to exhibitions and, in so doing, contributing to decolonizing museum practice. Such endeavours promote greater awareness of the work of museum curators, giving visitors and members of the community alike further opportunity to distinguish exhibition narrative from the processes of exhibition making, thereby leading to knowledge development, sharing, and exchange.

In our *Insights* section, Éric Giroux presents the work of Montreal’s Écomusée du Fier Monde (Ecomuseum of a Proud Community) developing exhibition projects for and with members of the community, namely with underprivileged and marginalized groups. The Écomusée’s approach has sought to give curatorial authority to the community, seeing its members not as simple visitors but as co-developers and active participants in shaping the Museum’s cultural mission.

Finally, in our *Gallery* section, Karen Worcman presents *Monte sua Coleção*, the Museu da Pessoa’s latest work-in-progress aimed at giving community members curatorial authority over the Museum’s online collection. Through such projects, visitors, who are encouraged to assume the role of guest-curators, are given the possibility to build and publicly share their own collections. Such endeavours allow the Museu to foster greater community awareness of its social role and its potential as a heritage institution to create and sustain a collective social memory.

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